



Elusive Identities: Intermingling of Personal and Political in Manohar Malgonkar's *Cactus Country*

Dr. Sreekala. B

Assistant Professor, Department of English
NSS College, Pandalam-689501

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Abstract

The birth of a new nation after independence and the consequent migration from both the parts of the divided nation brought about untold misery to millions of people. Manohar Malgonkar has taken up the most crucial moments in the life of a nation and portrayed it in terms of human situation in *Cactus Country*. History and fiction intermingle in the novel to motivate a young Pakistani officer, Aslam Chisti to live up to the martial code. Through the novel, the author reveals that the separation of Bangladesh was a historical necessity. *Cactus Country* portrays that part of history when Sheikh Mujib achieves an electoral majority. Assault towards the Dacca University by the military forces of West Pakistan during the riots is part of history. Only for the young, educated persons like Aslam Chisti, who is against the stringent codes of a military dictatorship, had a moral scruple for such an action. Aslam is one of the many fictional characters who is torn by external and inner factors — the division of the country, his parents' different religious affinities, and above all his own conscience motivating him to act honorably. Pakistan which the departing British cut from the body of India proved to be an unstable construction. The only criterion for their grouping together is that both are Muslim majority areas. But history proves that nations cannot be held together solely on the basis of religion.

Keywords: History, partition, identity, religion, nationalism.

Introduction

In the field of Indian Writing in English many authors dealt with the theme of the riots before and after the partition of India and the mental agony that accompanied it. The birth of a new nation and the consequent migration

brought about untold miseries to millions of people. Some of the migrants succeeded in building up a fortune in the new country. But the memory of their native land, the dear ones they left behind, the memories of those who died in the violence and the inhumanities and

the trauma that resulted haunted them forever. They consider their place of birth as their rightful home. In fact, they faced an identity crisis. The writers who dealt with these themes present the events as they are unveiled through the life of a particular character, family or a group of people. Through their experiences, authors portray the disillusionment that accompanied independence and partition.

Manohar Malgonkar has taken up the most crucial moments in the life of a nation and portrayed it in terms of human situation in *Cactus Country*. The novel deals with the problems created as a result of partition at the time India gained independence from British rule. It is based on historical facts and has all the violence, bloodshed, arson and other sinister acts associated with those turbulent events. In the 'Author's Note' Malgonkar writes that *Cactus Country* is a work of fiction but the "background is authentic and its account of Pakistan's Bengal campaign straight history. If anything, I have watered down the violence and left out the more gruesome excesses so as to keep within the norms of fiction."

Discussion

The protagonist Aslam Chisti has begun as an immature character, but evolved into a fully developed one eventually through his self realization. This realization is the shattering of all his beliefs and ideals about himself. History and fiction intermingle to motivate a young Pakistani officer to live up to the martial code. But Aslam's picture at the end of the novel is that of a betrayer of his own people- a traitor-even in the eyes of his own father. He is forced not only to leave his country, but also to accept a new faith. He was the son of a Muslim military officer and a university educated Sikh woman. His father was Major general Tarik Chisti who would have become the president of undivided Pakistan if things had developed according to his plan. His parents had a broad outlook and he had never experienced the problem of a mixed parentage. The identity crisis experienced by

Aslam Chisti is of a different kind. The trauma faced by him is not to migrate from his native place. His final return to his mother's place in search of an anchor is a symbolic representation of every man's search for a sense of belonging.

Himself a military man, Malgonkar revealed his great interest in the portrayal of military actions and situations in the novel. "To my mind history and fiction have not only many elements in common, history now forms the basis for most of my work.....I think the bonds of all fiction are these facts, and the facts are fantastic in Indian history, as they are in any history" (87). Many political figures like Yahya Khan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Zia ul Haq appear as characters in the novel. The references of "Crush India," reports published in the Pakistani Newspapers and the names of Mr. Bhutto, the 10th Chakwal Rifles and General Tarik Chisti, creates a sense that it is going to be a historical novel about the birth of Bangladesh.

The opinion that East Bengal and West Punjab are two separate nations which would have never held together is voiced by most of the political and military leaders of the time. Even Lord Mountbatten who had presided over the dismemberment was quite sure that these two pieces held together will not last long. Even the senior military officers who fought for the integrity of Pakistan had such a suspicion. But the union lasted beyond their expectations. Through the novel, the author reveals that the separation of Bangladesh was a historical necessity. India won independence after having divided the nation into two. The division of Pakistan into two parts is its eventual outcome. It is one of the major post-partition problems faced by Pakistan, a problem greater than that faced by India in post-partition days. This problem had its calamitous effects in India too. The inflow of refugees affected and weakened the social and economic spheres of the nation.

Cactus Country portrays that part of history when Sheikh Mujib achieves an electoral majority. He epitomizes the hopes and

aspirations of a large mass of people- the East Bengalis. The tribes of the West including the Balochis, the Pathans, the Sindhis and the Punjabis were stunned at the verdict of democracy which entitled Sheik Mujib a great victory. They could not even tolerate the thought of allowing themselves to be ruled by the 'despised Bengalis'. The military action that captured Bengal's most admired leader of those days was in a manner which is to be felt ashamed by a soldier. Aslam who was brought up and trained in cultured and refined society felt the meanness of the action. It was unbecoming of a soldier who has some elevated ideas about his duty. Author's intention is to portray the inhuman and unjust aspects of the liberation struggle. Violence must sit at the core of any history of Partition" (Yasmin Khan 129).

Aslam Chisti can never visualize West Punjab as part of India. He could not understand properly how his parents who believed in different faiths and belonged to either sides of the line of separation can marry without causing any irreparable estrangement in their respective families. He can never comprehend an undivided nation without any division on the basis of religion. "Was there a time then, before the birth of Pakistan, when the taboos were a little less rigid? When social intercourse between people of different faiths was possible and even intercommunal marriages could take place without causing irreparable estrangement?"(30) His doubts are quite normal and relevant for a person who belongs to the post-independent generation. To them these differences have strong and strict basis as they have the experience from their birth onwards.

Assault towards the Dacca University by the military forces of West Pakistan during the riots is part of history. The intellectuals of the Dacca University who voiced their protest against the unjust actions of the Punjabi rulers raised a serious threat to the military regime. As the army ransacked the premises many innocents were victimized. Only for the young,

educated persons like Aslam Chisti, who is against the stringent codes of a military dictatorship, had a moral scruple for such an action. While the military action in the campus was going on with rocket launchers and mortars, an agitated voice came to Gen Raza through the receivers. "But ...but they're students' hostels.... with hundreds of boys and...." (140). Nothing had prevented the military rulers from destroying an educational and cultural centre. Their only aim is to subjugate a nation that has turned against their authority. They used tanks and bayonets profusely to bring under command a whole nation, the unity of which provides strength to their struggle. "Here they don't speak different languages in different areas as we who live in the West do.... They all speak the same bloody lingo."(151)

At the time of independence Pakistan was formed for the Muslims on the basis of their religion. Throughout this time "convoys were ambushed, families separated, children orphaned, women kidnapped - and whole trainloads massacred" (Menon and Bhasin 35) Now, they found a strong unifying force, much stronger than the religion. The separative forces are numerous- if it is religion in some cases, it is language at some other cases.

Wahida Pirzada could not be patient with a West Pakistani military captain whose troops had killed her professors and raped her fellow students. But she displayed a helpful and courteous behaviour towards Aslam as he became a prisoner of East Bengal troops. His prison life among East Bengalis, changed to a considerable extent his thought process and outlook towards them. He no longer considers them as 'bloody Binges'.

Aslam though a prisoner in the hands of East Bengalis was keen on the developments in the country. The author showed his strong base in history while he related the attempts by Mr. Bhutto to gain support for a war against India, who according to him is inciting trouble in Bengal. But he got only verbal support from

China and America. While in India what Indira Gandhi was waiting for is a propitious day to start the war. Aslam languished at the thought of wasting away his soldier's life in enemy's captivity at a time when he has to prove his heroism.

Sentimentalism has no place in a war and it is not proper for a soldier to be sentimental. But Aslam could not control himself as he left the soil of Bengal. He has the experiences of his life at Bengal. It was where he had learnt the value of human relationships and life skills. It was closer to his heart than the importance he gained in West-Pakistan army, to a greater extent due to the powerful presence of his father Major General Tarik Chisti.

Disloyalty to his own country and army is not to be tolerated by General Tarik Chisti, even if that sin is committed by his own son. The only option for him is to immigrate to India which, he did with the assistance of Major Noor Pirzada. His mother's family which had no opposition to her marriage is now reluctant to accept him because his mother 'had renounced her family, her faith...' (404). For him the only alternative to get an identity in India is to change himself to his mother's faith, which he did. Till the time Aslam had no belief in any faith. But now he has to accept a new religion, his mother's, in order to have kinship with the family. But even while offering his readiness to accept their faith, he was quite sure that he was not entering a sanctuary, but a trap. His decision to go to India, does not help him to be independent. The hatred in the mind of the people has reached to such an extent that each one's belonging in the society is based on his religion, his language and his nationality. It is a crisis encountered by the post independent generation of a land which was once India.

Conclusion

Aslam is one of the many fictional characters who is torn by external and inner factors – the division of the country, his parents' different religious affinities, and above

all his own conscience motivating him to act honorably. Though he is not a pawn in the hands of history he is a human being affected by the flow of history.

It is not my endeavour to place these voices against the conventional, factual histories of the time. Rather, I would like to place them alongside existing histories: they are the memories of real people, memories of the history of Partition, and for that reason alone, they are important. It is through them that the history of Partition can be seen. (Butalia 279)

Aslam Chisti, the young officer in the Pakistani army is caught between the struggle of East Bengal and West Punjab in Pakistan. Pakistan which the departing British cut from the body of India proved to be an unstable construction. The only criterion for their grouping together is that both of them are Muslim majority areas. But history proves that nations cannot be held together solely on the basis of religion. In Pakistan regional nationalism triumphed over religious nationalism.

Shall we continue to think of 1947 as a constitutional division, an agreed upon partition of territories and assets? Or shall we face up to the enormity of the violence and the incredible acts of rape, torture and humiliation? (Pandey 2, 15)

A pathetic aspect of the history of post-independent India is the frequent riots and the innocent victims. The struggle for the liberation of Bangladesh also resulted in bloodshed and so many casualties. The author emphasizes these aspects by focusing his attention on the characters residing on the other side of the border.

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